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SUBJECT: LIAR, LIAR, PRESS CONSPIRE

11. (SBU) Summary. PM Robert Fico convened an impromptu press conference on December 10 to vilify the press for pursuing a story about Fico's family connections to an emerging scandal involving the Slovak land fund (septel to follow). PM Fico claimed during the press conference that all the major dailies in Slovakia were conspiring against him and had met privately to discuss strategy and consolidate editorial lines. The Slovak publishers' association responded with their strongest public critique to date, with all major dailies prominently printing on December 12 an editorial titled 'Prime Minister Fico Lies.' The response got little play, and although Fico's emotional, eight-minute press conference struck us as histrionic, even those Slovaks who deplore Fico's war against the media tell us that, in his ongoing war with the press that Fico has won this round. End Summary.

#### The Story:

12. (SBU) The daily 'SME' sent a letter to the regional court in Topol'cany (Fico's home town) requesting a review of the court files related to Fico's deceased father's estate. SME believed that the inheritance files might prove a familial link between PM Fico and the wife of the recently sacked director of the Slovak land fund (see septel). PM Fico has been sailing through many a coalition kerfluffle on corruption and nepotism by distancing himself from minority coalition members SNS and HZDS.

This story would have the potential to demonstrate that PM Fico may also be engaged in similar practices.

#### The Reaction:

13. (U) Surprisingly, an employee at the regional court in Fico's home town alerted him to the request. Hours later Fico called an impromptu press conference during which he compared the Slovak press to pigs and hyenas, irrefutably more insulting in the Slovak lexicon than the standard 'idiots' he is wont to deploy. During the press conference PM Fico also referred to an alleged meeting of the publishers of all Slovak dailies during which they supposedly plotted 'to print the same stories with the same headlines' in relation to the story. Fico played the family card heavily during the press conference, lamenting in a quavering voice that 'I am your target and not my dead father, not my dead grandfather, and not my son or mother.' This sentiment (and the victimhood) plays well in conservative, family-conscious Slovakia. SME was doing its job, but our informal polling of 'Jozef Slovak' suggests that there is widespread sympathy for Fico for the perceived attack on his relatives.

#### The Reality:

14. (U) While SME may have misconstrued the exact relationship between PM Fico and certain members of the Slovak Land Fund (cousin versus niece versus second cousin), there is no denying that they hit a sensitive nerve in making the connection. Slovak public officials, and perhaps even the general Slovak public, appear to be unprepared for the kind of embarrassing investigative journalism that affects even small towns (like

Bratislava). But, thanks (in part, at least) to the government's relentless messaging--the Slovak media is unethical, biased, dishonest and a tool of the political opposition--many in the public view the media with a jaundiced eye.

Comment:

15. (SBU) Fico has lashed out at the media once again in order to shift the story from the ongoing corrupt practices of his administration to the 'shadowy' opposition figure he has painted in media ownership. In a public appearance before economists and businessmen on December 14 organized by business daily 'Hospodarske Noviny,' Fico responded to a closing question on media relations by asserting that 'the Slovak press has no impact on public opinion.' Unfortunately, he is largely right. 'Jozef Slovak has yet to recognize the fundamental threat to his freedoms that Fico's anti-media campaign poses. Fico may not have noticed the shocked expressions of every businessman in the room when he made those comments, however. And he certainly has not noticed that the entire media establishment (even those TV companies benefiting from his lucrative patronage) is growing more unified in the face of his attacks.

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